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[Episode: 96 – Poets and Prose Writing](#) (03/04/2017)

Transcribed by David Turner – 02/04/2017

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Host: [Melissa Lee-Houghton](#) – **MLH**

Guests: [Joe Dunthorne](#) – **JD** & [Max Porter](#) – **MP**

Introduction:

DT: Hello, this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts, I’m David Turner. Before I introduce this episode, I’ve got some good news to share with you. Unfortunately, that means this will be a slightly longer introduction than normal and I’m going to be giving you all some homework to do.

First up, I'm delighted to say that we've been shortlisted in the Best Wildcard category for this year's Sabotage Review's, Saboteur Awards. You can vote for us before April 30th [2017] at www.sabotagereviews.com and follow the directions on the site to the Saboteur Awards voting [page](#). Alternatively, follow the link in the episode description.

Secondly, I'm thrilled further to be able to say that we've been shortlisted in the 'Represent' category for the inaugural British Podcast Awards. This category aims to champion podcasts that reach audiences that traditional media fail to reach. Since that pretty much sums up the very reason I started the podcast in the first place I still can't stop grinning about that particular nomination. This award is being decided by a panel of judges but if you'd like to vote for us as your favourite podcast of the year or indeed any other British podcast you can do so at, www.britishpodcastawards.com/nominations before April 28th [2017].

As always you can follow everything we're up to @Silent_Tongue on Twitter and at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Instagram, Soundcloud, iTunes and Stitcher. If you like what we do then please do tell your friends, it will help us a lot with trying to reach a new audience. Oh yeah, if you like illuminating between one and five stars on your computer, tablet or phone screen then why not rate us on iTunes or wherever you access the podcast?

Onto the episode. Firstly, a big thank you to Arts Council England whose funding made this episode possible and I've got to say without their financial support we wouldn't be getting shortlisted for awards. Secondly a big thank you to [Spread The Word](#) in Deptford, south-east London for letting us use their office space for recording this discussion.

This episode is hosted by the wonderful Melissa Lee-Houghton, author of Sunshine which is one of my favourite collections of poetry out through Pinned in the Margins. Melissa is joined by poet and novelist Joe Dunthorne, author of Submarine and the author of Grief is the Thing With Feathers, Max Porter. The group discuss writing as a compulsion, the differences between poetry and prose in practice and how as readers we still aren't able to divorce the writer from their work.

The beginning of the recording got a bit messed up, by me, so just be aware that the first person to respond to Melissa's opening question is Joe Dunthorne. Award winning stuff, eh?

There is a full transcript of this conversation to download via the link in the episode description. Here's Melissa.

Conversation:

MLH: Hello. This is Melissa Lee-Houghton standing in for David Turner and I am speaking today with Joe Dunthorne and Max Porter.

So, I suppose I've got you both here because I'm interested in people who write prose and poetry and a crossover of experimental forms and things because it's something that I do

and myself am very interested in. When I meet writers who I really admire and I do admire you both, I always want to know what compels them to write because it's something that I feel very fiercely that I'm compelled.

It's not the same as being inspired and I feel that when I read your work I can see that there's a compulsion, there's something necessary that needed to come out. So, I suppose my question is, what compels you to write what you write?

JD: I just thought of that thing where people [think that] most writers are either planners or non-planners. I'm a non-planner and, I think, the thing I enjoy and the thing I keep going back to is not knowing and sitting down and being surprised and that seems addictive and has seemed addictive ever since I first tried it. This idea of not having something and then two hours later having a thing you couldn't have guessed.

MLH: When did you first have that then? Is there a moment that you remember when you when had to sit down and write something and that seemed to start the whole thing off?

JD: At school I remember maybe, like, three chances to write creatively in my whole school career but they are like diamonds studded in my childhood like, "Oh my God. In school I can do this? This is amazing". So, they stick out really clearly to me as, "Okay, this is totally different. This isn't school, this is amazing."

MLH: When did you start to write? Is it fairly recently?

MP: I remember being told we could write anything, I remember that. I remembered maybe GCSE or something them saying, "This one's creative", and me thinking "They're going to regret that, because now I'm going to write this thing". But for me it was always the compulsion, which is what it is I agree, I was somehow split between making art and making music. So, I'd be making music and feel that I needed to draw and then I'd be drawing and I'd think I needed to be writing and there was a kind of triangular tension and I never really resolved it and I don't think I have.

So, now when I have the compulsion I tend to draw and my drawings aren't good enough or they don't feel to me like I'm fully able to express myself in my drawing but I can start something. My book started as drawings and I carry a notebook around. So, I start with a drawing or something quite diagrammatic and then that will become a couple of lines of prose or poetry, the distinction is invisible to me at that stage. Then I'll, sort of, chase it down and down and down and then I'll get to the stage Joe's describing where you go, "Wow, I've only been in here an hour or two and I've got something there that I hadn't planned on".

MLH: Would you describe yourself as a writer then because I quite like to describe myself as an artist even though I create nothing visual whatsoever. Because I feel there's a lot more going on and I'm writing in different forms and I think that, as an expression of what I do I prefer the term artist. So, I'm quite interested in your background. Did you train to be an Art Historian?

MP: Yeah. Well, you know, I suppose I'm a bit anticapitalist when it comes to describing myself as a writer because that implies that you're busy at work on the making of a product which is going to be writing and sold as such. I resent the fact that we're not, as a society now, especially open to... I'm not saying I'm a Renaissance man but to Renaissance figures that are able to move between different things. There aren't many of them about anymore and that is, I think, the whole thing of having to write one thing in the box saying what you do for a living.

JD: You're made to feel guilty, aren't you, if you claim to be anything close to a renaissance person. You must focus on your subject and you must dedicate your life to it and do nothing else.

MP: Well, if you said you were painting, most people would say, "Oh great. Are you going to do a show?" or "Is it for sale?" and that's a shame because it might just be that you're doing some paintings.

MLH: Yeah.

MP: I haven't got very good at saying I'm a writer, partly because my day job and I never got comfortable with that and it seemed ridiculous and then at a certain point it veered into being ridiculous not to say I was. But, probably, way down the list of things I do I'd, apologetically, say writer.

JD: It's a weird moment, isn't it, when you become comfortable with it? For ages it feels utterly wrong, especially poet. I mean, that comes late and eventually... Oh god, I just say it. I say I'm a poet like I did at the beginning at this podcast and didn't feel a twinge at all.

[LAUGHTER]

MP: Some of my favourite artists are people that have struggled to self-identify over the course of their career and I'm slightly suspicious, especially when it comes to some type of male performativity with regards being a poet. Like, "I'm a poet", as a kind of stance as a kind of muscular creative hew... Like someone who chips raw work from the coalface that is the world and presents their poetry back to us. I'm uneasy with that.

JD: This from a man that has written a book about Ted Hughes!

[LAUGHTER]

MP: Yes, to interrogate. Exactly that. But I think the people I've always loved are the people that scurry away from, as it were, the poetry world or the art world and find themselves, kind of, on the outskirts. [They] maybe do some drawings, maybe do some poetry, maybe write a libretto, maybe do some letter carving. Those are the people I most identify with because they're chasing down the compulsion.

Because, I think nothing would be more depressing or boring than being, for example, a novelist and you're on book number eleven and you do your bloody book launch with your

mates with their glass of white wine and there's nothing to say because the work's dried up and died years ago. [MLH: Yeah.] That's the kind of fear I have.

MLH: So, being a poet... I remember somebody recently, I think it was Annie Freud that said, that there's this twee idea about; poets are different, they're different to other people. I remember thinking it's absolutely not true, I live a 24/7 vocation of absorbing and existing... Just being in the world and engaging with language in my own mind and I consider that to be the work of a writer. Not necessarily sitting down and writing it down, you have to be in it.

And the people that are really in it, all the time, they use their experience not necessarily write about their experience but they're using everything, they're interpreting the world in a very different way. So, I would say that we kind of are quite different from other people. Would you agree with me or do you think that's a bizarre philosophy?

MP: I'm quite romantic about it. I do think that poets, for as long as we've had story tellers of any kind, poets have been different. There are people in any society that are able to get at things, get at truths or get at the peculiarities of consciousness and it makes them unusual and it is a vocation, yeah. I mean, I'm simultaneously very into that idea and a bit suspicious of it, if you see what I mean.

MLH: Yes

JD: I really like the idea of it but in a way that I, like, gaze across the table at it, wouldn't it be nice to be that kind of poet. I don't feel anything mystical about what I do, I [just] keep doing it. I do think poets like that exist, I'm just not one and therefore am I not a poet?

MP: Don't you think the poetry world is slightly set up to make everyone feel that way? [JD: Yes.] Like, it's an exclusionary thing, isn't it?

JD: Are you poet enough?

MP: Yeah, it's an authenticity contest and it's rigged against the people in it.

MLH: So, I guess why I've asked you both [here] is to talk about the difference between writing prose, writing poetry and the crossovers between the two. So, I suppose, Joe; when do you know that you want to write a poem rather than write some prose? What is going on in your head, what is compelling you to write either of the two [forms]?

JD: I think my kind of base function is poetry. So, if I sit down and just write then it'll probably come out with broken lines and somewhat like a poem. But sometimes I'll have written a poem and realise that it's a short story or that it's most ideal form is a short story. Equally, sometimes, I write something I think it's a poem but essentially, it's just a bit of notation about the world and it may well find a home in a novel at a later time. I try and be quite fluid about feeding things into one another so they're all, more or less, interchangeable. I just try to find the right form for each story.

MLH: Yeah. I often just start writing and it just becomes something. I'm not a 'planner' and I really like what you said before, because that's the excitement I get out of it. I just sit down and whatever comes out suddenly begins to take shape and that's quite an interesting and beautiful thing. I couldn't imagine anything worse than sitting down and writing... Or having an idea before I had the desire to do it, if you know what I mean.

JD: Do you have an idea and then you go from that or is it more that you just put pen to paper?

MLH: If I'm writing a poem I have a word or a line in my head that I write down and then it just happens. But I'm not sure what happens when I start writing dialogue and I start writing a poem. I'm not sure what happens when I start writing something that becomes fiction so I'm, kind of, interested. So, when you were writing your book, you said you were drawing... So, how did it become what it is? When was the point when you... Was it just a page of writing where you thought, this is it I'm going to continue with this?

MP: No, it was like collage, I had a lot of little bits and I started to realise that only when I was putting them next to each other was there some energy there. Then I was, kind of, hunting down that energy so it was like a project of juxtaposition but I also feel that I can't write prose. It's like swimming, I am swimming in a river and there is something happening, there's generative things happening with what I'm doing and it's, clear water. Suddenly if I start to write prose, even just more than half a page and doing conventional things like describing something or having two characters in dialogue it feels like the water is suddenly custard.

MLH: Custard, yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

MP: We keep talking about custard off air, let's get it on record! Like, suddenly it's stodgy. Suddenly all the electricity that I was feeling is gone, so then I realised it was going to be a project of whittling back and back and back. And that you can do so much in a couple of hundred words and, for me, my permission given for that would seem to be poetry and I suppose subliminally it's poetry but actually it's kids books. It's the speed of what happens, especially, in a rhyming picture book, you know.

And so I was thinking all the time how to maintain that little electric jolt of recognition you get. You know with some people, the great hybrid writers? The obvious one is Anne Carson, you know, in the early, good Anne Carson [books] where she goes from what seems to be memoir to what seems to be poetry and then what seems to be essay or whatever and it's not so much those things. It's the movement between them starts to make you giddy, that's where the engagement comes from.

MLH: I was thinking a lot about your book, Grief is the Thing With Feathers and I was thinking about Anne Carson's book, The Beauty of the Husband and I had a similar feeling about them both. I loved Anne Carson's collection and I didn't understand that it was a fictional relationship she was writing about. It was fascinating and I was trying to pick out

which bits might be her and which bits might be an authentic thing. Somethings you can imagine they are because they're so unique and specific that they can't possibly be fictional, I had this in my head. But the energy of that book, and I think you've captured something very similar, so I like that we've mentioned Anne Carson.

MP: For me, it's that we're quite late in the history of the thing, obviously the contemporary always is, but I think the novel has done what the novel does really really well and in very interesting different ways. But, I think, there is a risk that these things become... Once they're formalised into their final form, a collection of poems, a novel... There's a lot of sudden stodginess that comes with the finality of that form and I'm trying to resist that, I'm trying to get back to some sort of movement in the thing.

And it doesn't mean that novels can't have movement or it doesn't mean that poetry collections acquire a certain weight. But there is something about people like Carson, I suppose, what you're getting is play and the play is the thing for me. And I've felt that in order to keep myself interested in the writing of it and to feel that the things I was doing making stuff up or telling the truth or all those things that you do when you write anything. They were only going to interest me if they kept on moving in the internal complexity of the different forms.

So, I don't know whether I can get that sense of energy again for myself if I wrote a piece of prose or if I wrote poems. I think it's only in a hybrid form that I'm going to find that.

MLH: It's about having a lot of variety, I see you both as writers that have to have a lot of variety and movement. You can adapt very easily, particularly you Joe. Somebody asked me, actually, last night about... They'd read your poetry and not read novels and they wanted to know what your novels were like and if they're anything like your poetry. I had to think about it and I won't tell you what I said but... How do you see the similarities between the two different things that you write?

JD: It's interesting what Max was saying about that sense of variety and the, kind of, electricity of moving between... Within poetry you have the opportunity to really do that a lot, especially in a book of poems and that's always what's appealed to me. The idea that, again I think, it's slightly disapproved of because, like, the dream poetry collection in my anxious mind is that it's this one contained thing of beauty that has one direction and one mode. But that's never what you drew me to poetry, I always loved the thought that I can just do everything and go everywhere and change.

JD: And then in fiction... It is a challenge and with my first novel I tried to include lots of different types of writing, mainly to keep... That's not true, partly to keep me interested and partly to keep the reader interested because I had one character, one perspective, three-hundred pages and I tried to find all the possible ways that I could vary that voice. Not just in terms of, like some of it's in diaries, some of it's in like pamphlets, so different things.

Also just in terms of the psychological movement of someone over a year, how you become all these different people. So, in one chapter he seems like a cruel bastard in the next chapter he seems like jolly, sort of, frivolous. You know, like, that movement as well not just

formal... But in prose, I think, it is really difficult. This novel I've just finished ended up being really short because I couldn't find other ways to vary it.

It just had to be one voice, one direction, one movement and therefore it had to be really short. I couldn't imagine doing that over three-hundred pages with no other places to go so I just thought, "Okay, this has to be tiny".

MP: But with a novel, as well, you're listening to the project, to the book in ways you're not with a poetry collection because each poem has its own internal logic and then you perhaps think later about the coherence of the collection. Or you want to violate the perceived coherence of a collection and play with it and put things in that don't belong and such. But, I can't speak in any kind of broad notional terms about what I intend to do with fiction because that book took the form it took because I was trying to write about grief in childhood.

It violated the subject every time I tried to write conventional prose it was actually an affront to the children in the book and to the chaotic brain of experiencing grief to try and polish it up into normal prose. With poetry collections, I think... I am reading this Sophie Collins book, the big thing, the anthology.

JD: I haven't read that.

MP: It's about translation, the different types of translations. She labels three different types of translation. But one of the exciting things, for me, about that... It's got lots of good poems in it. It's got Rachel's [INAUDIBLE] poems and stuff and that... Is the movement between the translated work and the original and then also the annotator, the 'introducer' or the curator of the product., whose voice is always in play, saying why they included it. And that started to be much more interesting to me than the poems themselves, the architecture of the whole.

JD: That makes me think of how good a poem is when it's quoted in an essay, when the stanza of a poem interrupts an essay and it's the greatest moment both the poem is better than when you find it, "Oh, I'll look up that poem", you look it up and are like, "I wish I'd just stayed at the stanza in the essay".

MLH: Yeah, the Simon Critchley book about Wallace Stephens. I actually do love Wallace Stephens but if you just read his beautiful book about poetry and, specifically, Wallace Stephens. If you'd never read Wallace Stephens you'd absolutely have to go and read some straight away. It can do that, this is a wonderful thing, I think, critical writing is very important for poetry I don't think it could really exist without it. Though, that's a whole other conversation.

MP: But that is sort of the relationship, I think... I don't want to speak for you Joe because you're someone who happens to do both prose and poetry. But I think when I speak to some poets about what they're doing outside of the poetry, so much of is practical. It's to do with the fact that you have an editor, you deliver them a set of poems. You're submitting

them to magazines, then you've got enough so you do a collection. That's quite a specific set of, mainly, economic things.

MLH: Yeah.

MP: And I think therefore a poet has to work quite hard to recapture for themselves, their own reading map or writing map whatever it is. That might sometimes lead them into poetry and I think more often it leads them into critical writing which is a way to, kind of [INAUDIBLE]... Because I do this, my day job is to be inside other people's work, inside other people's novels a lot of the time and that's quite a loaded thing. It's quite a stressful thing, it's quite an important thing, it's a privilege to do but the rules are very different.

I think I'd be a very different writer if that wasn't my day job, partly because I'm working so hard to keep some of that thinking out of what I'm writing. I have to admit, off the record, but on the record's fine that what I will write will be in reaction to what I'm working on in the day. It will be when writing against the work of the people I'm publishing.

JD: Yeah, that makes total sense. Is there a sense that you are pissed off with having spent all day reading this one, I won't say this one kind as that's unfair on your excellent publishing record. But, you know, a particular kind of fiction and then you are like, "Okay, I'm going to do the opposite", or is it that you don't want to, kind of, cross the Venn diagrams of your life?

MP: A bit of both. I think the main thing, for me, the main struggle is that with... Say I'm editing someone's book, you've got to be their soulmate, you've got to be their intellectual playmate in the work they're doing, you've got to be up to speed with them. So, you know, I might be in a book about the building of Coventry Cathedral, or whatever, and I'm at play with that person and their ideas and I'm trying to make the book most itself. So, I'm keeping myself out and it's quite a strange game anyway.

But, also, I'm protecting them from what is my job which is the business side of things, you know, what cover to put on that book, how to pitch that to sales teams and publishers and that business. That's publishing as industry and that's already quite a nauseating blend and it makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, so then when I get home and I write... Basically, any velocity that I bring to it is impassioned by the desire to escape that thinking of knowing too much.

I know too much about how literary fiction works and the signifiers we load books up with an all that kind of thing. So, like, nonsense poetry or really violently hyper-realistic writing about animals, a piece I've just written, is my way of getting as far away as I possibly can from the, kind of, good behaviour of modern literary publishing. Whereby lots of different things need to be quite orderly and in play and I think everybody needs the thing they do in the day in order to get the energy to do the thing they do in the night, if you see what I mean. I don't know how you would think about that between the different fields you write in. Or lived experience.

MLH: I live in a fantasy world of my own construction currently and I just do live to write. But I find that my influences, I guess, to write are often not writing, they're not other writers. So, I think, I'm quite musically a-tuned, so I have to have a lot of music in my life, I can't get through an hour without music, generally... And visual art.

So, what things influence you most in your writing? Is it that you spend a lot of time, well you obviously spend a lot of time reading [Max] other writers, but what else is it that gives you the energy to want to write something? And obviously, you have to write at length quite a lot of the time as a novelist. I don't know, how long do you sometimes sit and write for, at a time?

JD: It is so excruciating, novels are just so long, it is actually unbearable. This recent one took four years and, I guess, I worked on it every day and the thought of doing that again makes me want to cry. But the thing I do to not be a writer is play football which feels like the most brilliantly, 'unwriterly', 'unpoety' thing to do. I head the ball a lot and think about how it's damaging my brain and I'm a bit angry and unpleasant on the pitch and it's just a great other world to me.

MLH: I think you have to have physical things. I think with writing, actually, you have to be very physically engaged. It's not just about being sat and just writing something with a pen or typing, it never is. I have to expend a lot of physical energy to be able to write what I do. Recently I've been walking, sometimes for four or five hours a day, around London and then sitting down and writing because it gets me really pumped. I need a lot of adrenaline sometimes and I'll have really loud music on.

I will create an atmosphere, myself, in which I've got that spark and that energy and it rarely comes from reading something else, it maybe does sometimes but rarely. So, on a daily basis if you felt that you need to write something, do you feel like you need that, sort of, inner turbulence to do it? Or do you need to be quite calm and relaxed about it?

MP: I'm very squeezed because of the day job and because I've got three young kids so I get home and I might be all burning up with political anger or frustrations or that 'itch'. You know, the scratchy restless thing of needing to get something down and needing to get something out, at least enough that you can realise it's wrong or have a fiddle with it or something like that. Then I'm straight into cooking the tea and bathing the babies and needing to be responsible but also needing to be fun and not stressed out and not looking at my phone and stuff like that.

So, the amount of time I actually have is squeezed right down to nothing at the moment but I have to say that's quite good for me. [MLH: Yeah.] It's a bit like the 'pram in the hallway' thing, the best things that ever occur to me are as I'm wiping an arse. [LAUGHTER] I believe in that, I mean, I totally get why people like Franzen need to go bird watching for six months to think about The Great American Novel. But because I have no interest in writing The Great American Novel I'm absolutely happy to have a pocket full of little bus tickets with scraps of writing, you know, that seems to be how I do it.

MLH: Yes.

MP: The other thing is if you gave me a blank computer screen and ten days I think I'd panic and I'd go wandering off and get lost. I think nothing would be less exciting to me than that freedom.

MLH: I do think that there are, obviously, lots of different kinds of writers and the way that they work and the way that they process works and things. But I've noticed that most writers need to be very tethered so they need their day job, they need the family, they need a structure and a routine. Because you've got so much going on in your mind that something has to rivet everything down or you end up like me and just writing as a way of existing. I am, sort of, being quite grandiose because I'm a very grandiose person.

There are few writers, like William Burroughs for example, that would live a completely hectic life with no structure and be a great writer. It just doesn't really work like that [for most writers] because you need to keep everything contained. There's an element of having to control a lot to be able to do that work, I find.

JD: Yeah, in my experience, I really thought that what... I guess, like a lot of writers think. I thought I needed space and time and this magic, like, open zone with nothing and having done it I just think no actually it doesn't help at all. So, yeah I kind of agree I just think you can maybe throw a lot at your life and if you're a writer you're going to find those little moments and bus tickets.

MP: Someone said something nice somewhere, I'm terrible at remembering where I've read things. Someone said something nice about catching a thought on the wing, you know, that if you're attuned to the world and you're going to be writing or making art or music or whatever it is, you are an open field. And things are just being chucked at you the whole time and bouncing off you and occasionally you can just grab a thing.

So, I guess it's that constant readiness and that does sound a bit mystical but I think I do buy into it. It's that thing of listening all the time. Do you know that lovely Don Patterson poem about finding... You know, when his kids say to him, "What do you do? Explain your job" and he says, "You know when you go to the beach and you bring back a bucket full of stuff and you go through it and find the things that you want to keep that are interesting? That's what I do every day". Just turning the day's lived experience over until I find the things that are shiny and you put them in poems.

MLH: I find that I get so much in my head every single day of my life that if I don't get it out by writing it I would start to believe I'm a My Little Pony perhaps, you know, I would just completely lose the plot. I think it's a very, sane thing to do and I think that you need a sort of level of being in some sort of meditation, I'd imagine that the football is that for you.

I do a lot of things that are physical activity because they provide me with this, sort of, meditation where your mind's working and it's working at quite an unconscious frequency. There's a lot happening in it but you're so engaged physically you're not actually having to construct thoughts and imagine things. But it all helps you to get the work out, doesn't it?

MP: For me, that is the drawing, that's what I do when I'm drawing. Like, in meetings at work I doodle and early on in my time there I was ticked off a bit for how elaborate my doodles were. Like, "You cannot have done that really quite good picture of a whole tree if you were listening", but it's the exact opposite. [MLH: Yeah.] The quality of that tree means I was listening.

MLH: Yeah.

MP: For me, it's the ancient thing of 'brain to hand'. If I really need to think I'll get a flower pot... Because it's partly... Things like displacement activities, but if I get a flower pot and loads of sugar cubes or acorns or little pebbles and just sit and chuck a pebble in the pot, I can literally feel the gears of my mind ratcheting up back into proper fast thinking mode. I need something like that.

MLH: Do you find that when you're writing, sort of, lyrically and you're writing poetically, do you feel like your mind is working at a different frequency from sitting and writing, say, an essay? Because I do, I feel like... I call it a kind of heightened lucidity that I, sort of, enter. I find that addictive we used the word addictive before, it's an incredibly addictive thing. I mean, I feel quite embroiled in the idea of bringing on those states of mind to keep being able to do it.

MP: Yeah.

JD: I always think, when I'm writing fiction that there's this... I won't say a fifth gear but there's a side gear that is somehow the poetic access or something. I've got this metaphor of, like, in a musical when characters have an important decision to make, like maybe they're supposed to go to the mountain to take a dangerous trip but they really don't want to. And the writer, me, hasn't thought of a really good reason why they might decide to go to the dangerous mountain and then in the musical they sing a song and at the end of the song they pack their bags and they're going. In the same way I've, like, turned on the 'turbo nuclear poetry' button and then I just excuse myself from narrative. Like, sane narrative progression, I just allow a jump.

MP: But that's the constant permission you're giving yourself to be the master of your own work and that's a lovely thing. My analogy, which I think I nicked from somebody actually, is the cathedral. So, you are building a big building and it needs all the things a big building needs like a floor and walls and stuff and it needs to have an entrance and an exit, all of those sorts of things. But what really happens, the really exciting thing is when you're doing that with one hand and then you're also doing some really fine detailing up in the roof that no one's ever going to see. Just little gargoyles and tendrils and stuff and that's where the work gets exciting and it's when the work becomes your work not anyone else's.

It's in the escaping, as it were, the drudgery of building a thing that has to have certain length or a certain style or structure. And getting your poetic fifth gear just banging away at the detail in the corner and that's when you're... It's like a pot spinning, to bring in another analogy, you're tapping it all the time, it's fast it's tapping. Then you break away from that

kind of work and it is very much like you've gone for a run or played a game of football or had sex or something and you're all blushed and hot.

That's the thing and if you only get that once or twice a week then fine by me. I'll leave stuff in a notebook that I just know has got that 'hotness' and I'll know it's there for some time.

JD: That's exciting, isn't it? That feeling of, like, in a year's time I might just open that and remember this bit of energy.

MP: Well, I lost a notebook this year. I don't mind that I lost the notebook in terms of, I lost six months of working on a novel. I was pretty gutted but not, you know, I helped myself not feel too gutted by just opening a newspaper and seeing that most people had it a lot worse than some writer that had lost his second novel on a train. But I did feel gutted because I know for a fact that there were half a dozen 'hot' things in there. Like, things that circumstance and the muse and my energy or whatever it is won't recreate and they're gone.

JD: And it will kill you to try and recreate them.

MP: Exactly exactly. I sometimes have a little sensory sense of what they were, I know what they felt like, almost like a synesthetic thing. I don't know what they were though and I just had to walk away.

JD: If I can comfort you, I have had that feeling then found the notebook and been painfully disappointed.

MP: Just shopping lists.

[LAUGHTER]

MLH: It's the only thing I get anxious about when I go anywhere, is my notebook. I'm not bothered about my phone, I'm not bothered about any of my possessions not even my money, I'm not bothered. But the notebook. I did lose one at Glasgow University but it managed to find its way back to me eventually which was a beautiful thing. Though, I actually haven't bothered looking at it to be honest.

I was wondering how much you both regard your own experiences and incorporating aspects of your own real life experiences and autobiographical details. How important do you find that incorporating into your work? Are you writing about yourself a lot of the time, or not?

MP: I don't know yet. Probably but probably from a kind of... I mean, lots of people asked me with the book, *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers*, how much of it was true and the answer is none of it and all of it. You know, there is a certain self-deprecating, sort of, dazed metrosexual kindness about the bloke which I think is close to the kind of person I like. I wanted him to be the kind of person I liked so I could spend a few months with him and

have these people love him in a way that I wanted them to love him so that the book had some had some glow of truth about it. But, you know, I made him up.

I think I'll always be interested in dead parents because that was a profoundly formative thing for me. I'll always be interested in sentimentality and nostalgia because I feel them like a drug, I feel them drawing me and I recognise they're dangerous but I want them in my life. I think I'll always... It's a masculinity thing in a way like I'll always be a bit interested in scatological things because I think one of the weird things about being human in, so called, civilised society is that we're in denial about it all the whole time. So, I think there'll always be shits and farts and premature ejaculations in my book because I hate it when there aren't because it feels false.

MP: But I'd like to move away from my... The challenge for me next is can I do plot divorced from form and can I do something that isn't based on the single thing I've been thinking about most my whole life which is how much I miss my dad.

MLH: Yeah, but most great writers have an obsession. [**MP:** Yeah.] And they will keep going into the wound until they die and that's what makes them really great. I know I do, I maybe have several but I've given myself permission to accept that and say this is what I'm doing even if I'm writing about the same thing when I'm nearly turning senile. It's okay because that is obviously always what I was going to do. So, [Joe] maybe with Submarine, obviously, you've been a teenage boy yourself and that must have helped.

MP: Have you?

[LAUGHTER]

JD: For a few years, yeah.

MLH: Did you have to go back into that experience or was it all fictional?

JD: I remember I was twenty-two I guess or twenty-three and I still felt I had, like, a living cord between me and my fifteen-year-old self and I read Adrian Mole and it really made me angry. I think in retrospect not because it's a bad book but because it was, generationally, nothing to do with my generation. It felt completely false and the fact that it was still being pulled out as an accurate representation of being a teenage boy felt to me outrageous. I looked around for that fiction that represented me and my friends at that age and there was nothing dark enough, nothing gross enough, nothing true enough. So, I felt lucky to find something like that which existed but I didn't read it.

So, I still felt I was in a position to remember what it was like, yeah that was really, like, just trying to recall those feelings and that mind state of being, kind of, bullet-Proof and quite creative in certain ways and a complete child and, kind of, quasi intellect. You know, all these things where you can be everything at once at that weird transitional fifteen-year-old moment where you have access, basically, to your future self and your childhood self and you flip-flop between the two. You also just think you know everything without doubt which is an amazing feeling.

MLH: Yeah. When you write a poem are you working with some sort of construct as an idea of yourself when you're writing or are you writing as you?

JD: I've generated, I think, a few versions of me but there's, like, a version of me who I put in my poems. Like, when I name myself, when I'm a 'Joe' character and that's fun I really enjoy that. I enjoy making him not a nice person and that feels good.

MLH: Why does it feel good?

JD: You know, I obviously have bad instincts, we all do and I just find it fun to vocalise them and I guess it feels risky in a fun way to put myself out there as... Like he's really into money, this version of me, and he's just a bit of a dick and he loves football, that's not quite all he is but it just seems... I guess in terms of the wider poetry reading that I do, I don't see that personality that much so it amuses me.

MLH: It is highly amusing. Yes, it's a very beautiful thing.

MP: Does it give you a certain, sort of, freedom as well? In terms of the craft, in terms of writing good lines of poetry, to not be in the mind of someone similar or identifiable yet close?

JD: Yeah, identifiable so you get access to your own voice but then you're playing in a field which isn't that well used. So, you've got access to more lines than you might have if you were doing something more...

MP: What poets do you think have done that well?

JD: It's completely different but I was just thinking about, when we were talking about our themes, you know there's that Fredrick Seidel poem?

MP: I was about to say do you mean like Frederick Seidel?

JD: Right, "I repeat my themes", this is one of his lines and he's been repeating his themes... I've got his full book and there is a little transition but, basically, he's been writing the same poem every day for fifty, sixty years whatever it is. He's interesting because he takes it so far and without any apology... Like, the lack of apology of a billionaire or however rich he is. He seems to actually embody the evil person he is in his poems which makes it doubly interesting because, you know... I've never met him, who knows, but that seems a fascinating position to take.

MLH: I think it, kind of, fascinates me that a lot of people, if they write about themselves, they want to paint themselves in a very good light. We have lots of instances of quite abject things in our work, [I'm] not particularly interested in doing that... I know I don't paint myself in a brilliant light, in fact some of the things that I mention people probably find them shocking because they're admissions of things that nobody really wants to admit to.

So, I've picked up on that with you both and that's always been one of the many reasons that I really like what you do.

MP: I think we... I'm disappointed, I'm so disappointed in many things, but one of the things I'm disappointed in is that as a literary culture we we're not very highly developed in our ability to divorce the author from the work. That's so crap [**MLH:** Yes] and it's so boring that, like, one hundred years after Ulysses we're still saying, "These poems seem to be largely autobiographical". You know, how dull and what a curiously limited conversation that is even if you go into it in a loving way. Even if you go deep into Fred Seidel's poems and try and find out whether that's really Fred Seidel having pornographic thoughts about a woman on an aeroplane. Where does that get you as a reader? It's boring.

JD: Yes. But weirdly I still am in that habit, despite writing the thing myself and thinking, "Well no one reading this"... You know, my excuse to myself is, "Every sensible reader separates the author from the 'I' voice", but I don't know when I'm reading.

MLH: Yes, I find it really hard to...

MP: But that's fine, that's a post-modern gesture, that's an acceptance that no one... You know, that's like me banging on about, I wish we could read Ted Hughes poems outside the biographical [context], of course we can't! The point is we've got to grow up and accept that you cannot, the two are organically interlinked. What do you do then? Is it possible to be self-conscious and critical and have your critical faculties about you while you identify what might be [Sylvia] Plath and what might be, you know...

We should be able to do that now but when you say, you know, "These readers", that's my challenge I think as publisher as well. Like, not editing things with an imagined critic in mind, you know, and same with the writing, getting rid of the voices of your fans as well as your critics. It's possibly even harder with your fans because you're playing for them because you know they like what you're creating, that's a difficult thing. I think the only answer to that is a removal.

MLH: Yeah.

MP: Not everyone can have a, kind of, Alice Oswald-like removal from the world in which they're fully in tune with their own vision. But I think it's beneficial when people try.

MLH: Yes. What's your relationship to the reader then, how do you feel about being so in the public eye as writers? Do you find that it's quite inhibiting because you know that lots of people have read your work? That there's [now] some, sort of, expectation maybe placed on you when you've done something quite successful? A very very annoying question, I know but I thought it may be of interest.

JD: I was going to ask you the same thing. Has there been a... You know, you were talking about your writing process being a daily, like, moment to moment experience. Has the experience of being on a fancy prize and having public adoration changed that process or is it just the same?

MLH: Well, I think if you write or create art in any way and you do it because you have to or you are compelled to, prizes and things like that don't fit into your artistic space or your creative space at all. They are actually quite... I found it, not distracting but just it just made me feel very very very uncomfortable and weird. The idea [seemed] that you have to be, obviously, grateful as it's a really big thing. It's an achievement, all these sorts of things line up but in actual fact it doesn't benefit what you're trying to do.

MLH: My whole life is... That's what I'm trying to do, I'm trying to write things. I can't say that it's really benefited my work as a writer, I think it's all very interesting... I mean, this is about the business aspect of writing, it's not even a good indicator of how good work is.

MP: No.

MLH: It's not at all. I don't know, how do you both feel about being successful writers, which you are?

MP: You'll have to talk about that Joe because I don't know yet. But the conversation with yourself is taxing. Because say you start to write a poem and the voice in your head says, "This is very different from the confessional poems that were in my last collection. I'm going to lose the sympathy or support of that readership". My set of choices would seem to be, do I go for another formally experimental piece, you know, because I was in an article and it compared me and a couple of other writers as the 'new experimentalists'?

Or do I turn my back on that and write the story I want to write which is actually very straightforward and conventional? Those are crap questions to have in your head when you're trying to write something.

MLH: They really are.

MP: So, I just had get them out of there and listen to the book. But we can't like... Who's tough enough to do that? I mean, I'm not trawling through my Amazon reviews or anything anymore because that's a mug's game but these things are in my head. Of course, they are because I live in the world.

MLH: Yeah.

JD: That's why I got my haircut, did you know that?

MP: No, why?

JD: Someone in an Amazon review said it was time. They worked out my age, they said I was thirty-two and it was time for me to get my haircut and I thought, "Oh, that won't change me", then a year later I got my haircut.

MP: I saw Sally Rooney, the novelist who's about to be published by Faber, saying on Twitter, "Does having a novel published mean people are able to talk about my appearance?" Like, that's bang out of order. It is bang out of order.

MLH: That is terrible. Somebody actually said I'm an unreliable narrator because I've obviously had some bad relationships. I thought that was beautiful, I've got to put that as an epigraph in something, haven't I? But there is some really bizarre things, like a lot of people claim to know me when they meet me and they will talk about things that have happened to me even though I've never had a conversation with them before. You know, I feel as though I can't physically interact with that person ever again because I just feel it's just beyond bizarre, "Can you not understand this is an art form?" You know.

MP: But we come from a generation of people that are sensitive and I am pro-choice, I wouldn't have it any other way out. One of the mistakes, I think, of the generations above us was that, kind of, shoring up [and] closing the door to all criticism and just powering on with what you are doing. I think it belied all kind of insensitivity, social and economic and class and religion. All sorts of things that were fundamentally an unkindness in my eye and I don't want to be unkind and I don't want to ignore...

If you put something into the world, I don't want to ignore the response it gets. I want to be involved in that conversation, I'm interested in it, I'm curious and that may well be part of my fragile ego but to me it's a belonging, you're, part of a thing.

MLH: Do you feel like you need the company of other writers a lot? I do. I really do because I feel like they're the kindred people that I understand and [with] a lot of other people I just don't feel that... If people don't understand what it is I do and then I have to talk to them about it and, you know, they're quite fascinated... I need to be with people that I can have those conversations with about their work, but not just that. I do feel like we're kind of a kindred group of people, maybe you don't?

MP: I'm spoilt because I'm around them anyway and when I'm not around them I feel abject fear. You know, so, I've gone from being someone that was a bit cynical about, like, book fairs and stuff to loving it, especially post Brexit. Like, getting them around to my house and introducing them to my kids and saying, you know, "This is Salvatore, he's Italian. He's smelly, he's really smelly! But he's great and he produces these weird illustrated books.

[LAUGHTER]

MP: You know, these are my people and they're eccentric and they're interesting and they've devoted their lives to literature. I love them. So, yeah, I spend my whole days talking about books which is a great privilege. And with people that give a shit about it. Do you feel the same?

JD: I do yeah. I just started teaching and having not done it for a long time, I'm now teaching a weekly workshop and everyone gives a shit and they all really want to be good. And it's just brilliant. They keep asking me, like, "Are you okay?" because it's been... It's been really interesting, it has had its moments of tension they're like, "Are you okay

because the last tutor, we think, she quit after a term teaching us". But no, this is brilliant, I'm loving it.

MLH: Yeah, so, what have you both got going on at the moment? What are you working on, what are you trying to do with your lives?

MP: Go on Joe.

JD: I have finished a novel and it comes out this time next year so February 2018, it's called *The Adulterants* and is published by Hamish Hamilton. And in my life, I'm working mostly on poems which feels like a luxurious and beautiful thing.

MLH: Have you got a collection?

JD: I would like to have a collection, I don't have one but I'm certainly eyeing it up.

MLH: Wonderful.

JD: Yeah, it feels good.

MP: Have you published poetry since your Faber pamphlet?

JD: No.

MP: Woo, that's a few years, ago isn't it?

JD: It is a few years ago, I got a few in the back pocket waiting to come out.

MP: I'd buy it.

[LAUGHTER]

JD: What are you up to?

MP: What am I up to? Not a lot. Struggling a bit with the next book but I'm not in a hurry, I don't want to do it for the sake of it. I've just written a piece for a sculptor called Nicola Hicks, who wrote to me and said she'd liked my book and would I like to write for her catalogue. She just invited me to her studio, which is round here somewhere, and it was incredible. She said no pressure, if you respond you respond and if you don't then don't worry.

MP: I walked in and I responded in a big way, she makes these huge straw beasts. Sometimes half man, sometimes animals. Like, a lion on top of a dog, like, people becoming Minotaurs, half man, half crow. They're made of straw, covered then with black paint, just incredible. I went home that night and just outpoured this thing. That's about it really.

JD: That's great!

MLH: Thank you very much for listening, thank you to Joe and thank you to Max and thank you to David Turner.

End of transcript.